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ABSTRACT

The comic book is discussed as an aid to improving English conversational ability in preadolescents and teenagers. A description of some of the characteristics of conversational English, such as contractions, stereotyped phrases, and conversational fillers, should precede the presentation of data from comic books. Classroom techniques suggested for use with comic book material include having the class rewrite the story in more formal style, and listening comprehension practice with taped recordings of the story. A speech identification game is given as one example of how comic books can be used to increase conversational sensitivity. (AM)

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'DJEVER THINK ABOUT COMIC BOOKS?

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A STUDENT studying English as a second or foreign language in his own country (for example, in Brazil, Colombia, Spain, Turkey) has a limited number of opportunities available to him to advance his conversational ability. The enumeration of the "learning-inducing conditions" (in Brazil, at least), if arranged in descending order of frequency-intensity (degree and range of exposure to oral communication, especially to dialogue), would look something like this:

1) Movies
2) Studying English in a public or private institution
3) Radio brodcasts (B.B.C., Voice of America)
4) Face-to-face communication with native or other fluent speakers of English
5) Television (programs are usually "dubbed" into the local language in Latin America; they seldom carry English: narration and/or dialogue)
6) Recordings (especially popular tunes).

One might argue, of course that in all these "opportunities" except numbers 2 and 4 the learner plays a passive role–he is simply exposed to varying samples of spoken English without any personal involvement or participation. But, nevertheless, some amount of "transfer" is bound to take place from such apparently haphazard and unystematized exposure. I recall my own personal experience during adolescence, when going to movies and listening to radio programs and popular music laid the foundation on which my present fluency in English was gradually built.

The "learning-inducing conditions" set forth above feature conditions that expose the learner to communication through vocal-auditory-visual modalities. What about the written language? What kinds of written materials can contribute to the student's conversational skills? It is my firm conviction that there is one element–an element hitherto little explored in the classroom–that may prove extremely useful to students of English who consider themselves (or are evaluated by their teachers) as conversationally handicapped or deficient. The instrument I have in mind is the comic book.

My primary data is taken from four comic books that I have chosen as representative of the different sorts that cater to preadolescents and teen-agers:

Golden Comics Digest – Marge's Little Lulu and Tubby, No. 19, September 1971. Published bimonthly by Western Publishing Company, Inc., North Road, Poughkeepsie, New York 12602. Hereafter abreviated as **GCD.**

Walt Disney's Comics and Stories, No. 7, April 1970. Same publisher. **WDCS.**

Batman with Robin the Teen Wonder, No. 235, September 1971. Published monthly except April and October, by National Periodical Publication, Inc., 2nd & Dickey Streets, Sparta, Illinois 62286. **BAT.**

Walt Disney Uncle Scrooge, No. 95, October 1971. Published bimonthly by Western Publishing Company (address above) **WDUS.**

Logically, a description of some of the characteristics of conversational English should precede the presentation of data extracted from the above "corpus", hence the following summary for your reference:

Features of Conversational English

1) **Contractions** such as **I'm, he's.**
2) **Hesitation pauses,** such as **uh.**
3) **Exclamations and interjections:** of pleasure (**boy!**), of disappointment or frustration (**aw!**), enthusiasm (**wow!**), surprise or contempt (**huh!**).
4) **Afterthought** (a comment, response, or explanation that occurs after the main idea has been expressed).
5) **Assimilation phenomena** as represented by "conversational punctuation" or "eye dialect" (the latter a term used by some linguists): Do **ya wanna** go now?
6) **Weak-stressed forms of words** (specially personal pronouns), spelled in simplified or modified fashion: Let's join'**em**; Tell'**im** it's time to go; **C'mon**, let's go.
7) **Omission of second person singular personal pronoun:** (Are **you**) Coming?
8) **Omission of such auxiliary verbs as BE, HAVE, and DO:** (**Are**) You tired? (**Do**) You want to come? (**Have**) You got a match?
9) **Use of "explanatory or clarifying phrases"** such as **I mean, that is:** He got there a little late, I mean, only a couple of minutes after the show had started.
10) **Repetition of words and syllables** as in **I—I** thought I saw someone at the door . . .
11) **Contrastive stress to signal emphasis** (represented in conversational punctuation by underlining or by italics):
I didn't do that . . . , **he** did it.
12) **Short sentences.** There seems to be a rather high incidence of short sentences in conversation, although it is best characterized syntactically in terms of variability of sentence length. (Cf. Chapter 4, "The Language of Conversation", in Crystal and Davy, **Investigating English Style.** London: Longmans, Green & Co. Ltd., 1969, pp. 95-124).
13) **Incomplete or unfinished sentences:** I didn't mean to . . .
14) **Vocatives or attention-getting items** such as: **Hey,** Bill give me a hand . . .
15) **Use of confirmation (or information-seeking) tags** such as: No money, **huh**? At nine o'clock, **right**?
16) **Echo-statement or echo-question:** (Speaker **A** repeats part of **B**'s statement in question form): **A** says: "Look out **below**!" **B** adds: Below what?"
17) **Informal usage:** Try **and** do it. He's acting **like** a child. She **sure** is pretty.
18) **A grammatical lapse or a false start** in opening a conversation: There was . . . There were several people at the meeting.
19) **Thought-completion**: Speaker **B** completes **A**'s original thought. Here is an example taken from William E. Rutherford, **Modern English: A Textbook for Foreign Students.**
New York: Harcourt, Brace & World. International ed., 1968 (p. 88):
A says: "We can stop back later and fill out the forms."
B adds: . . . "Or fill it out at home and send it off in the mail."
20) **Fixed or stereotyped phrases** (speech mannerisms) such as:
To tell the truth . . . ; as a matter of fact . . .
21) **Paraphrasing or restatement: A** says something and **B** restates it by saying, for example: "You mean you . . .?"
22) **Simultaneous or overlapping speech**: Two or more speakers speak at the same time. (In comic books this can be seen through the use of multiple-speaker balloons).
23) **Conversational fillers** such as the introductory words **why, well, oh, now.**
24) **Abbreviated form of nasal-question tag: h-m-m.** Example: **Five minutes late, h-m-m?** instead of **You're five minutes late, aren't you?**
25) **Shortening of such words as you, excuse, suppose.** In "eye dialect" spelling they would be written as **y, 'scuse,** and **s'pose,** respectively:
'scuse me: I s'pose; y'know.

USING COMIC BOOKS

How can teachers of English use comic books as an aid to improving the conversational ability of intermediate-to advanced learners?

Technique — Steps to be followed with a teen-age class:

1) The teacher assigns each story in the comic book to be read as home assigment.
2) The next class, the teacher divides the larger group into several subgroups (three to four students at most) so that students can best check their comprehension of the global and particular (utterance by utterance) meaning expressed.
3) The teacher challenges each subgroup to identify as many features of conversational English as possible, according to a reference list previously handed out. The teacher would (**a**) stimulate intergroup conversation, (**b**) clarify points concerning usage, and (**c**) comment on the student's interpretation of graphic devices used by the comic book writers in recording speech.
4) The teacher conducts listening practice: he says the lines spoken by the characters in the story or, ideally, he plays a tape recording of the story, in which different voices have been used to correspond to the sex, age, and occupation of the characters in the story.
5) The teacher asks the students to be prepared to act out the story with the aid of a blackboard script on individual copies of the text, which would serve as a reminder of the characters' lines. Or the teacher could use another prompting device, such as a small card held in each student's left hand.
6) The class could rewrite all instances of "eye dialect" in ordinary spelling.

7) The class could rewrite the entire story in a more formal register.

Pedagogically, comic books can be explored in other ways, such as paraphrasing – that is, the rewriting of a story, with minor changes made in vocabulary and syntax. An imaginative teacher will certainly discover other ways in which to make such apparently "passive" tools as comic books into highly motivational and productive learning aids. Granted that the choice of particular comic books should be made in terms of their appeal to the learner's interests, the teacher should, nevertheless, take into account linguistic as well as cultural content in deciding what to use.

I hope that this brief presentation will arouse the curiosity of colleagues who had never thought of comic-book reading in TEFL as a potentially useful and pleasant didactic resource.

Needless to say, such technique could be tried even with adults, for weren't most grown-ups once readers of comic books? The task of getting adults interested in reading comic books in a foreign language should also prove professionally rewarding, since an element of entertainment would be provided along with the usual "serious" reading assignments. A magazine such as MAD would certainly appeal to most young adults. Have you ever thought of using it with your advanced students?

If I may take the liberty of giving advice to my colleagues – and my own experience as a reader of comic books (entertainment blended with educational aims) prompts me to do so – my advice would be as follows: If you have never thought of using comic books as an adjunct to other "serious" reading materials, give it some thought, will ya?

This bimonthly publication is sent free of charge to a select list of teachers in Brazil and also to institutions abroad on an exchange basis.

To have your name placed on our complimentary mailing list, contact the local Yázigi Director or write to Prof. A. G. Short, Editor of Creativity, Av. 9 de julho, 3166, São Paulo, S.P. 01406, Brasil.

Editor's Note: The Yázigi Institute of Languages, São Paulo, Brasil, has for the past 25 years, been using a comic book approach in the production of its EFL materials, such as Yázigi English Program, Course of Conversational English and Let's Have Fun.

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AN IDENTIFICATION GAME

Below are some examples of speech taken from the cited corpus of comic books. This little identification game can serve as an exercise to increase your own conversational sensitivity – or that of your students. Examine each example and identify it by number according to the 25 categories listed under "Features of Conversational English", above. The titles of the comic books are abbreviated as previously indicated.

	SOURCE	ITEM	EXAMPLE	CATEGORY NUMBER
1.	BAT	eh?	You're Professor Burke, eh?	_____
2.	„	outa	Robin – Get outa here!	_____
3.	„	why'd	Why'd you want to brain me with a poker?	_____
4.	„	**did**	Father . . . ! You **did** survive!	_____
5.	„	Swell	Swell! I'm ready!	_____
6.	„	(It)	Looks like they met more than they bargained for, Batman.	_____
7.	„	sure	He sure is a swell guy, Bruce.	_____
8.	„	. . . er . . .	I – er – just wanted to ask you a question.	_____
9.	WDCS	depends	**A** says: Well, it all depends!	_____
			B adds: Depends on what, Unca Donald?	_____
10.	„	go tell	I'll go tell the colonel.	_____
11.	„	whut	Hey! Whut happened to our guide?	_____
12.	„	'em	I wonder why it took 'em so long to deliver it.	_____
13.	„	'cause	I won't be able to go 'cause I don't have much money left.	_____
14.	„	hafta	I don't hafta sit there, silly!	_____
15.	„	betcha	I betcha we're walkin' around in circles.	_____
16.	„	gimme	Hey, gimme **my** flower!	_____
17.	„	how'm	How'm I gonna get my nickel?	_____
18.	„	(is)	Somebody bothering you, sis?	_____
19.	„	(it)	Sounds like a good deal!	_____
20.	„	ol'	This ol' thing is awful . . . but it's better than nothing.	_____
21.	„	wanna	. . . and I don't wanna hear any stories about **you**!	_____
22.	„	G'wan	G'wan, go play somewhere else!	_____
23.	WDUS	(have)	Where you been, Uncle Scrooge?	_____
24.	„	Say!	Say! Did you ever notice how much lettuce looks like money?	_____
25.	„	Er –	Er – Waiter! Can you cash a ten-thousand-dollar banknote?	_____

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